

BAPTISTS and Voluntary Cooperation

"Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints."

2 Corinthians 8:3 (NIV)



In the book ***Rope of Sand with Strength of Steel***, James L. Sullivan wrote, "The denomination is held together by fragile organization ties, but the common experiences, beliefs, and purposes that unite them are stronger than steel." **The Baptist denomination indeed is held together by a rope of sand: voluntary cooperation.**

Baptists believe that the Bible teaches that a church should be autonomous. Baptists also believe that Christ commanded Christians to be involved in missions and ministry throughout the entire world. A single congregation, no matter how large it is, cannot possibly fulfill the Lord's command to reach the entire world.

Therefore, **Baptists face a dilemma:** How can independent congregations fulfill the missionary command of Christ without forming some sort of connection among churches that could possibly undermine their autonomy? **The answer is "voluntary cooperation."**

The Bases for VOLUNTARY Cooperation

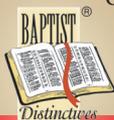
Voluntarism is a theme that permeates the Baptist symphony of beliefs and polities. For example, Baptists believe the following:

- ❖ The Bible teaches that salvation results only from a **voluntary** faith response to God's grace gift of the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-10). Faith cannot be coerced.
- ❖ Baptism is a symbol that a person has made a **voluntary** commitment to Christ as Savior and Lord. The New Testament reveals that baptism never should be coerced but should always be **voluntary** (Acts 2:41; 8:35-38).
- ❖ A person's decision to become part of a church ought to be **voluntary**. No one should be forced to be a member of a church (Acts 2:47).
- ❖ Financial support of a Christian ministry should be **voluntary**. The voluntary tithes and offerings of the members, not money from taxation, are to finance a church (2 Corinthians 8:1-15).
- ❖ The **voluntary** nature of churches applies also to the relationship of congregations to each other and to other parts of the Baptist denomination. Each church is autonomous and as such is free under the Lordship of Christ to determine how it will relate to other Baptist entities (Acts 13:1-3).

The Bases for Voluntary COOPERATION

The New Testament sets forth the concept of voluntary **cooperation**.

It records examples of such **cooperation** among the earliest Christians and churches. Cooperation was for the sake of effective ministry to human need, fellowship, missions, and evangelism (2 Corinthians 8-9).



The New Testament also indicates that issues which threatened to divide the early Christian movement were dealt with through voluntary **cooperation** as persons freely discussed the issues (Acts 15). Another example of voluntary **cooperation** in the New Testament was the agreement that certain evangelists and missionaries would major on different people groups (Galatians 2:1-10). The New Testament churches in the same geographical region had some sort of **cooperation** with one another (Galatians 1:2; Revelation 1-3).



The Nature of VOLUNTARY COOPERATION

How can cooperation be achieved without sacrificing voluntarism and autonomy? Baptists have answered that question by churches voluntarily cooperating through informal networks of churches and through organizations such as associations, societies, and conventions. A number of Baptists were slow to accept such organizations because they feared that they would try to exert authority over the churches, violating church autonomy.



The autonomy obstacle was cleared by stressing that a church's relationship to any organization beyond the local church would be purely voluntary. With this guarantee, numerous Baptist individuals and churches were willing to establish organizations for various causes. **None of these organizations has any authority over churches.**

"One basic operating principle of voluntariness.... They held together by firm ties, but the common beliefs, and purposes, they are strong."
Rope of Sand with
James L.

The first step in voluntary cooperation was the formation of associations of churches for the purpose of fellowship and discussion of issues. These associations, sometimes termed networks, often assist in multiple ministries.

A second approach involved establishing organizations termed societies that have a single focus, such as foreign missions, home missions, or publications. Individuals or groups become members by voluntarily making financial contributions to the society.

A third approach to cooperation was the development of conventions, sometimes termed unions or fellowships. A convention differs from a society in that a convention solicits and combines support for various efforts of the denomination, such as missions, education, benevolence, and publications, rather than for a single issue.

The above approaches to voluntary cooperation are designed to **function in essentially an ongoing, permanent basis.** In addition to these, **Baptists have developed other methods of cooperation,** often less formally organized and based on such things as common interests, positions, culture, or causes. Some of these are primarily for fellowship and mutual encouragement, others for sharing information, and still others for action projects.



For example, Baptist organizations have been developed by Baptists of comparable size churches; by Baptists who have similar positions in the denomination; by Baptists from the same cultural or language group; by Baptists especially devoted to actions for a common cause.

The Benefits of Voluntary Cooperation

Baptists have developed various entities to provide means for churches to voluntarily cooperate. **Such voluntary cooperation provides many benefits.**

The denominational organizations originally were formed to serve the churches by providing a means for them to work together to advance the cause of Christ. Voluntary cooperation enables churches to do far more together than they could do alone in such causes as missions, ministry, and education.

Associations and conventions assist churches in carrying out their own local ministries. They can also help churches that are experiencing difficulties, such as internal conflict and financial crises. A church in this situation can request help from an association or convention without losing any of its autonomy.

Individuals, such as pastors and church staff members, can benefit from voluntary cooperation.

Associations and conventions maintain lists of pastors and church staff members for ease in communication. Counseling is often available for ministers and their families. Denominational organizations provide opportunities for the deposit of funds for retirement and the purchase of insurance.

Baptist institutions benefit from voluntary cooperation. A voluntary relationship with an association, convention, or society provides a base of support that enables them to have more stability and strength than they would have as totally independent organizations.



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*Strength of Steel
Sullivan*

Responses to Challenges to Denominational Voluntary Cooperation

Obstacles and challenges to denominational voluntary cooperation exist. For example, some persons regard denominations as a relic of the past and see little reason to cooperate. A number of churches do not want to be drawn into denominational conflict and choose to avoid any participation in denominational cooperation. Others contend that the organizations involved in carrying out cooperative missions are cumbersome and often unnecessarily expensive.

The challenges to voluntary cooperation can be met by responding to objections and explaining its benefits. Here are some suggestions for constructive responses to the criticism of and objections to denominational cooperation:

- ❖ **By participating** in the voluntary cooperative efforts of Baptists, churches can be part of an extensive vibrant movement to make and mature disciples for Christ and to minister to persons in his name.
- ❖ **By remaining** cooperative, larger churches help provide means for smaller churches to enjoy the benefits of cooperation.



❖ **By being involved** in Baptist voluntary cooperation, churches provide a constructive response to conflict that may exist in the denomination.

❖ **By taking part** in Baptist voluntary cooperation, churches demonstrate that voluntary cooperation is not only about what a church receives but also about what it is able to contribute to causes such as evangelism, missions, and benevolence.

❖ **By staying** with denominational voluntary cooperation, a church retains the opportunity to help shape such cooperation to be more effective and efficient.

❖ **By carrying out** voluntary cooperation, churches follow the model of New Testament churches; this is a way of affirming their belief in the authority of the Bible.

Conclusion

A rope of sand with strength of steel—that is the way James Sullivan, long-time Baptist leader, described Baptist voluntary cooperation. Although fragile, it is highly effective. It enables churches to maintain their autonomy while effectively ministering in Christ's name.

For further information, see www.baptistdistinctives.org

The basic material in this leaflet originally appeared in a series of articles in the *Baptist Standard* in 2005. Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund to provide for publishing the series. He asked William M. Pinson, Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles. The financial assistance of The Prichard Family Foundation and Vester T. Hughes, Jr. enabled this series of nineteen leaflets to be produced based on the articles. Skyler G. Tinker designed and formatted the leaflets for publication. Each leaflet is for both individual and group study.

The topics in this series: (1) Baptists: Who? Where? What? Why? (2) What Makes a Baptist a Baptist? (3) The Lordship of Christ; (4) The Bible as Authority for Faith and Practice; (5) Soul Competency; (6) Salvation Only by Grace Through Faith; (7) The Priesthood of All Believers; (8) Believer's Baptism; (9) A Regenerate Church Membership; (10) Congregational Church Governance; (11) Church Autonomy; (12) Baptist Church Life: Organization, Worship, Officers, Ordinances; (13) Voluntary Cooperation; (14) Evangelism; (15) Missions; (16) Ministry; (17) Christian Education; (18) The Application of the Gospel; (19) Religious Freedom.

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